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SUBJECT: RURAL SOUTH AFRICA: CHANGE COMES SLOWLY TO MANDELA'S HOME VILLAGE

¶1. (SBU) PolCouns and PolAssist visited Nelson Mandela's birthplace of Mvezo, and also the former President's current rural home in Qunu in Eastern Cape Province December 7-8. Qunu is located along the main N2 highway, 30 km south of Mthatha, the district headquarters, in an area that was part of the Transkei "homeland" under apartheid.

Mvezo is 28 km further up a dirt road from Qunu, and is a tiny impoverished community of brightly-painted small houses and mud huts scattered across a cluster of hills. The district has a population of over 26,000 people. Most residents of Mvezo have no access to basic services like water and electricity; and local people complain that the area has seen little development since ¶1994. Other than small farming, there is little employment in the area, and many families depended on government grants.

¶2. (SBU) Hopes for development in Mvezo have, however, increased since the appointment of the 34-year-old Zwelivelile ("Mandla") Mandela - Nelson Mandela's eldest grandson - to the chieftaincy of the Mvezo Traditional Council 18 months ago. (FYI: Nelson Mandela's father had been the Chief in Mvezo until he was unseated by the colonial authorities in the early 1920s. The family was then forced to move to Qunu. End FYI.) The younger Mandela told Polcouns and PolAssist how when he arrived in the village to take up the position of traditional leader, many locals had laughed and wagered he would be gone by the next day. He has, however, proved his cynics wrong, and become an active presence and a strong advocate for the district's development. In addition, he was elected an MP on the ANC list in last April's elections. Mandela has prioritized providing more schools, better roads, running water, and sanitation for the area. He has gained a seat on Parliament's new Committee for Rural Development and Agrarian Reform, a position he intends to use to pursue these goals. His presence in the village has sparked hope among villagers that the area will finally receive attention from a government hard pressed to bring change to South Africa's rural poor.

¶3. (SBU) Since assuming the chieftaincy, the younger Mandela has helped set up a mobile clinic in the area with funds donated by the US-based Family Health International (FHI). The Department of Health has also begun construction of a clinic in the area, which Mandela said he is hoping to get upgraded to a mini-hospital, also with FHI support. He linked this effort to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has ravaged the area, as is the case in many parts of South Africa; the younger Mandela has taken an active role in persuading villagers to get tested for HIV/Aids and begin treatment if necessary. He also linked the pandemic to his advocacy for the creation of a high school in the area, arguing that young people who stayed closer to home were less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior.

¶4. (SBU) Mandela told Polcouns and PolAssist that employment in the district other than subsistence farming had been virtually nonexistent until recently. In the past year or so, however, he had managed to persuade the government to begin construction of a multi-million dollar cultural center in the village which is intended to house both a museum to commemorate his grandfather's birth and early life, as well as the local traditional courts. The

center and adjacent restored village compound have been declared a National Heritage Site by the Department of Cultural Affairs, which he hopes will attract tourism and generate employment for the area. He added that he had already begun using the construction of the center to justify bringing in a tarred road as well. He acknowledged, however, that local development will be a long struggle. The area still has no electricity and no water supply, and unemployment remains high.

15. (SBU) The younger Mandela contrasted Mvezo with many urban townships, noting that the latter have received considerably more development funding over the past 15 years than most rural areas. Yet, he noted, it is in the townships where most service delivery protests have taken place. He argued that, in rural areas like his, where traditional leaders maintain authority and are active both in hearing people's grievances and advocating for development, citizens are more prepared to put up with the slow pace of change. This, he said, showed that traditional leaders have a very real role to play in bridging the gap between South Africa's past and its future. End comment.
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